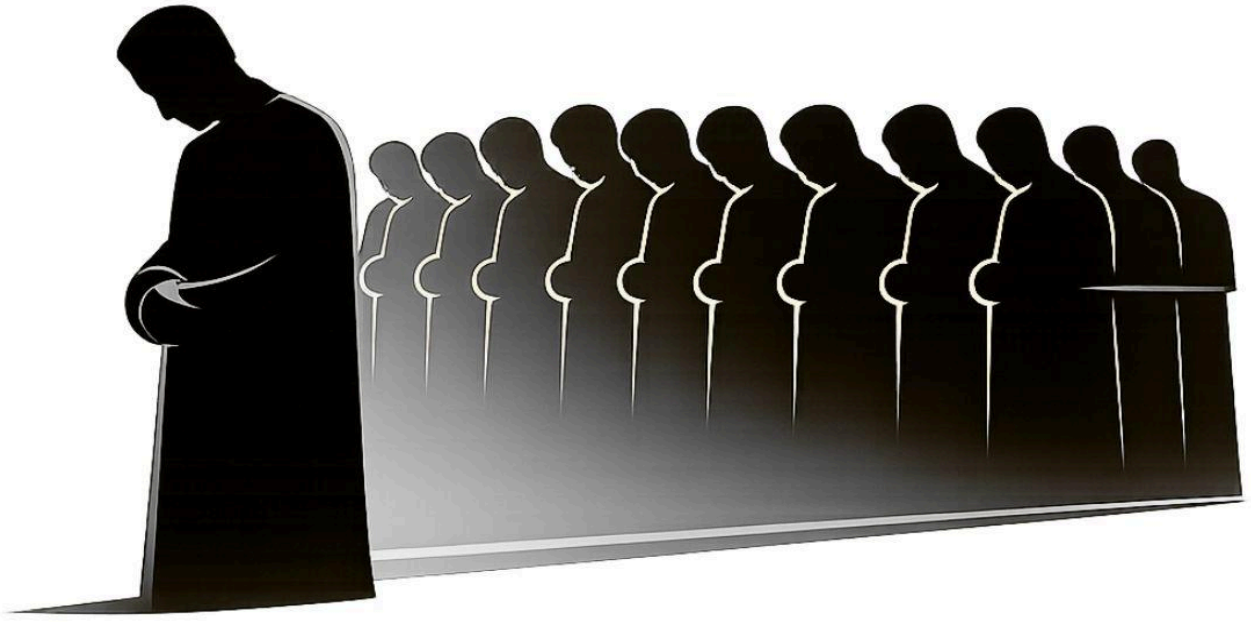
Who Can I Pray Behind?

During Times of Fitnah

Shaykh Ismāʿīl Susayyī



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Praise be to Allāh, Lord of the Worlds. And may peace and blessings be upon the one sent as a mercy to creation, his family, and companions altogether. O Allāh, purify our hearts from doubts and desires, and our actions from riyāʾ, O Lord of the Worlds.

As for what proceeds: the imām is either of two conditions: either Muslim, which can be prayed behind by the consensus of the scholars, or kāfir. As for the Muslim imām, he is either:

1. Devout, upright and upon correct ʿAqīdah, you should try to pray behind such imāms.
2. Or is sinful and disobedient of Allāh's commands. He has sins between him and Allāh that have not reached bidʿah. Likewise, it is permissible to pray behind these imāms by the consensus of the scholars.

The imām could also be a mubtadiʿ (innovator), his bidʿah is either one of two types:

1. Bidʿah mufassiqah (sinful bidʿah), it is the bidʿah which does not remove its doer from Islām and does not make him disbelieve, however he is still sinful and has fallen into a major sin in opposition to the Sunnah of the Prophet (ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam). Once again, the imām who falls into this is either of two conditions:

a. He calls to the bidʿah. As for such an imām, if he persists on his bidʿah after being presented the sharʿī texts (i.e., his bidʿah is clarified to him), according to the most correct opinion - it is better to not pray behind him, though some scholars permitted it.
b. He does not call to the bidʿah, but he commits it. There is no issue with praying behind these imāms by the consensus of the scholars. Some scholars say he is prayed behind, while others, and this is more correct, say that it is preferred to avoid praying behind him.

2. Bidʿah mukaffirah (apostasizing bidʿah), if the imām falls in this case, he is a kāfir outside the fold of Islām. His prayer is not accepted, because he has not fulfilled the greatest condition of prayer, Islām. Some scholars said that jumuʿah, ʿĪd, and congregational prayers should not be prayed behind them according to your ability and you should pray behind someone else, however, if you could not find anyone else, then you can pray behind him but repeat it later.

Mufāraqah Prayer

Alternatively, you can pray behind him with the intention of mufāraqah prayer. Mufāraqah prayer is carried out when you know that the imām is a kāfir outside the fold of Islām - in this case, you make intention to pray separately from the imām

while being behind him, and you would synchronize your movements with others being led in the prayer, such as your rukuʿ, sajdah, standing, and so on. No one will notice that you are praying as mufāraqah, and you have not followed the kāfir imām. You can also bring a group of muwaḥidīn and Muslims who would be behind the kāfir imām, but intend to lead congregational prayer for the other Muslims behind or besides him who do not want to pray behind the kāfir imām, and he would synchronize his movements with the others being led (by the kāfir imām). This method is permissible, and some scholars have stated that it will be written for them as a congregational prayer.

Praying Behind Kuffār Imāms

Here, a question comes forward - if I do not find any other imāms in my area, should I pray behind the kāfir imām, or not pray congregational at all? Allāh knows best, the scholars state that it is better to pray jumuʿah and ʿĪd behind the kāfir imām, and then repeat later, of course this is if you could not find anyone else. It is reported that Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (raḥimahullāh) said that even if the imām is a murtadd, I would pray behind him but repeat it later. And Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn prayed jumuʿah behind the Jahmiyyah and repeated it for 40 years. As for jumuʿah prayer, you do not repeat two units; but rather four units as Ẓuhr prayer, and Allāh knows best.

Imāms with Unknown ʿAqīdah

As for the imāms whose condition is unclear and it is not known if they have committed kufr or not. The correct view is that you can pray behind them without investigating their ʿAqīdah. Prayer is an act of worship and piety, if you wanted to fully enjoy it and be safe, then you may investigate the imām's ʿAqīdah. Especially if you live in dār ul-kufr, or if you are in a time when misguidance, shirk, and kufr are widespread. If the imām turned out a kāfir, then take one of the methods which we have mentioned, and Allāh knows best.

Some Statements of Shaykh al-Islām

Shaykh al-Islām ibn Taymiyyah (raḥimahullāh) stated: "As for prayer behind the mubtadiʿah - this is an issue of dispute that requires detailed elaboration. If you did not find another imām except him (the mubtadiʿ) especially for the likes of jumuʿah, the two ʿĪd, and ḥajj prayers behind the imām of the mawsim; then it is prayed behind him, whether he is righteous or not by the consensus of Ahl us-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah[1]. Those who avoid praying behind the imāms are (often) from Ahl ul-Bidʿah, such as the Rāfiḍah and their likes who do not perform jumuʿah or congregation (behind the imāms). Thus, if there was only one mosque in a village, one's prayer behind the sinful imām there would be better than him praying in his home alone, so that it does not lead to abandoning congregational prayer altogether. And if he could pray behind someone other than the mubtadiʿ, then that is

[1] **NOTE:** Ibn Taymiyyah is referring to bidʿah mufassiqah here.

better and more virtuous without a doubt. But if he still prayed behind the mubtadiʿ, there is dispute among the scholars regarding this: the madh-hab of ash-Shāfiʿī and Abī Ḥanīfah validate his prayer. And as for Mālik and Aḥmad, there is also dispute in their madhāhib"[2]

He (raḥimahullāh) also stated: "From the principles of Ahl us-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah is that they pray jumuʿah, the ʿīds, and the congregational prayers; they do not abandon praying congregational prayers and jumuʿah as Ahl ul-Bidʿah did, from the Rāfiḍah and others. If the imām's condition was unclear, and no bidʿah appeared from him. Then congregational prayers and jumuʿah are prayed behind him by the agreement of the four aʾimmah (ash-Shāfiʿī, Abī Ḥanīfah, Mālik, and Aḥmad) and other aʾimmah of the Muslims. And none of the aʾimmah said it is not permissible to pray behind him until his bāṭin (inner reality) is known. But rather, the Muslims after their Prophet (ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam) have continued to pray behind the Muslim of unclear condition. However, if a bidʿah or sin appeared from the imām, and it was possible to pray somewhere else - the majority of the scholars validated his prayer, from them the madhāhib of ash-Shāfiʿī and Abī Ḥanīfah, and it is one of the statements of Mālik and Aḥmad. If it was not possible except to pray behind this mubtadiʿ or sinner, such as in jumuʿah - then in this case, the mubtadiʿ or sinful imām is prayed behind according to the general opinion of Ahl us-Sunnah

[2] Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā (vol. 23/pg. 355)

wal-Jamāʿah. This is the view of ash-Shāfiʿī, Abī Ḥanīfah, Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal, and other aʾimmah of Ahl us-Sunnah with no difference of opinion between them. When the ahwāʾ (i.e., bidʿah and misguidance) increase, it is preferred to not pray except behind the one whom you know of his condition, as was reported from Aḥmad answering a questioner. And Aḥmad did not say: 'Prayer is only valid behind one who you know of his condition' either."[3]

He (raḥimahullāh) also stated: "Thus, prayer behind one of unknown condition is permissible by the consensus of the Muslims' scholars. And the Ṣaḥābah (raḍiyallāhu ʿanhum) prayed behind people whom they knew of their sins. Just as ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd and others from the Ṣaḥābah prayed behind al-Walīd bin ʿUqbah bin Abī Maʿīṭ who was a drinker of alcohol. One time, he prayed four units in morning prayer, and he was lashed by ʿUthmān bin ʿAffān for that. Likewise, ʿAbdullāh ibn ʿUmar and others from the Ṣaḥābah prayed behind al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf. And the Ṣaḥābah and the Tābiʿūn prayed behind Ibn Abī ʿUbayd who was accused of ilḥād and calling to misguidance."[4]

He (raḥimahullāh) also stated: "Alongside the fact that Aḥmad (sometimes) did not declare individual Jahmiyyah as kuffār, nor anyone who said he is a Jahmī (unrestrictedly), nor everyone who stood with the Jahmiyyah in some of their bidʿah. He prayed behind the Jahmiyyah who called to their

[3] Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā (vol. 3/pg. 280)
[4] Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā (vol. 3/pg. 281)

statement (i.e., ʿAqīdah), and heavily punished those who opposed them. Aḥmad and his likes did not (unrestrictedly) declare them as kuffār. Rather, they believed in them being upon Islām and affirmed their imāmah, he made duʿāʾ for them, and he viewed jumuʿah and ḥajj prayers behind them. He also viewed conquest with them and prevented rebellion against them. At the same time, he rejected and denied their false statement which constitutes severe kufr, even if they did not know it was kufr. He rejected their statement and strived in refutation of them according to his ability. Thus, he combined obedience to Allāh and His Messenger by making the Sunnah and (true) religion apparent, rejecting the bidʿah of mulḥidīn Jahmiyyah; and with upholding the rights of the believers from the leaders and ummah, even if they were ignorant mubtadiʿīn, and oppressive sinners."[5]

Summary & Final Word

Concluding and summarizing what was said - if it was clear to us that the imām has fallen into bidʿah mufassiqah, then it is permissible to pray behind him, but he must be taught and clarified to him that what he did was in opposition to the Sunnah. If a more upright imām was found, it is better to pray behind him. Regarding our time, the secularists and so called "Islamists" who believe in democratic elections and supporting kuffār against Muslims, whether by speech or action, it is not permissible to pray behind them, but if you did, you should intend mufāraqah prayer or repeat your

[5] Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā (vol. 7/pg. 507-508)

prayer behind them. Once again, if you found someone who is upright in ʿAqīdah and in his actions, then pray behind him and do not resemble the Rāfiḍah's action as was mentioned. I hope I was able to provide correct knowledge on this issue to Muslims. Anyone who reads this will benefit from it. And Allāh knows best of what is correct.

And may peace and blessings be upon our Prophet Muḥammad, his family and companions altogether.